

U.S Representative

***Bernie Sanders***

A Special Focus On Veterans' Issues



*Spring 1998*



**Congress of the United States**  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

*DEAR VERMONT VETERAN,*

*I want to take this opportunity to keep you informed about issues of interest to Vermont's veterans.*

*The men and women who serve in our armed forces, and the veterans who served before them, are honored during special holidays several times each year for their service and dedication to our country. However, commemorative events and speeches are not enough to fulfill our commitments to those men and women who have placed their lives on the line. Most importantly, if we are serious about honoring our veterans, we must live up to the promises the United States government made to them when they put on their uniforms. Among other things, we must make certain the health and disability benefits they were promised are not taken away.*

*I am deeply concerned that our traditional support for veterans may be eroding in Washington. For example, in last year's "balanced budget agreement," which I opposed, Congress cut Medicare by \$115 billion dollars and made a 19 percent real cut in veterans' Programs for the Fiscal Year 2002- more than \$4 billion below what would be needed to retain the current level of service. Meanwhile, in the same bill huge tax cuts were being handed out to the wealthiest people in our country. That's wrong. I will continue to oppose such unfair legislation, and will do my best to stand with veterans to protect their concerns.*

*I am pleased to inform all Vermont veterans that Don Edwards, a Vietnam veteran and former Adjutant General of the Vermont National Guard, has joined my staff and will focus much of his attention on veterans' issues. If you are a member of the armed services, or if you are a veteran or military retiree, and you have a question or concern about health care or any other service-related issues, I hope you will contact my office and speak with Don. Our number is 1-800-339-9834 or 802-862-0697.*

*In closing, I want to congratulate all of you for your efforts in defending our country in times of national need. I also want to offer a special thanks to those of you who are serving on my Veterans Advisory Committee. You are an important resource for me, and I look forward to working with you in the future.*

*Sincerely,*

*Bernie*  
Bernard Sanders  
Member of Congress

## VETERANS AND HEALTH CARE

Military retirees have traditionally expected that their country would protect their health care in their later years by providing access to military medical facilities or through care typically provided by the Veterans Administration (VA). However, the closing of bases such as Plattsburg AFB and Ft. Devens has left many veterans and military retirees without ready access to military medical care, while severe budget cuts have caused surviving military medical facilities to restrict health care access to military retirees.

Reduced VA budgets have also resulted in a gradual restriction of medical access for veterans. I am happy to report, however, that there are efforts under way to try to rectify this situation. **Veterans should know, for example, that the Veterans Medical Center in White River Junction, and all New England VA facilities, are now open to every veteran, even if he or she is not disabled or does not meet an income means test.** I am sure all veterans will welcome this decision, which is explained in greater detail below. There are also new developments of particular interest to Gulf War veterans, and there are several new pilot programs that, if successful, may be expanded nationally and could help improve the availability of health care services for veterans.

### VA OPENS ITS DOORS TO ALL VETERANS

First, let me explain the very important new decision from the VA that allows all veterans to receive care in VA facilities. Until that decision was made last February, only veterans with a service-connected disability or those who met a low-income means test were eligible for VA medical care. Those requirements are no longer in effect. This means you can now get care in VA facilities no matter what your income or condition.

**There has been some confusion over this decision, because the VA is also conducting a drive to encourage veterans to enroll at VA medical centers before October, 1998. This drive is an attempt to gather statistics to demonstrate the importance of VA services for veterans, but, in conversations between my office and the VA, it was made clear that enrollment is not required before you can receive care. All Vermont veterans should understand that all veterans are eligible for the full complement of VA health care services, even if they do not enroll in the VA medical program.**

### FEDERAL EMPLOYEES' HEALTH BENEFIT PLAN

Recently, the House passed legislation authorizing the Department of Defense to set up a demonstration project to allow up to 70,000 Medicare-eligible military retirees and their families to enroll in the Federal Employees Health Benefit Plan (FEHBP), which provides health care insurance for many government workers. The Federal Employees Health Benefit Plan provides a number of different insurance plans, and the cost is subsidized by the federal government. Veterans' groups have expressed a great deal of interest in this program, and, if the demonstration project is successful, we can hope to see it expanded nationwide.

### MEDICARE SUBVENTION

This is another pilot program. Ten military hospitals and clinics in six regions outside New England are initiating a long anticipated test program in which Medicare funds will pay the medical bills of older military retirees using military facilities. Retirees will be required to enroll in Medicare part B and must agree to receive all their treatment through the test program. Retirees must have received previous care at a military facility and become eligible for Medicare by December 31, 1997.

This pilot program is of great interest to the Veterans' Administration, which will be closely evaluating it for its nationwide potential to provide medical care to older military retirees and to veterans. If this pilot program also proves successful, we can expect it to be implemented for veterans in Vermont and all over the country.

### MacDILL AIR FORCE BASE PILOT PROGRAM

Another pilot program is being designed to provide medical care for 2,000 military retirees in the area around MacDill Air Force Base in Florida. That program will be initiated this summer. Vermont veterans and retirees who have moved to Florida or winter there and may wish to enroll in this program once it is in place should contact the MacDill facility or my office.

# GULF WAR ILLNESS

Veterans of World War II and Vietnam may remember the difficult political struggles that had to be waged before the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration finally acknowledged the health problems associated with exposure to atomic radiation and Agent Orange. Tragically, the DOD and VA are at it again. This time, the issue is Gulf War Illness and the refusal of these governmental agencies to adequately research, treat or compensate the 100,000 veterans of the Gulf War who are suffering a myriad of symptoms which are called "Gulf War Illness."

Hundreds of Vermonters who served in the Gulf are suffering from this disease, which includes such symptoms as: joint pains, chronic fatigue, short term memory loss, rashes and gastro-intestinal problems. I have attended a number of meetings with Vermonters who are suffering from these problems, and it has been an extremely sad and emotional experience to hear what they and their families are going through.

In my view, one of the major causes of Gulf War Illness is that our soldiers were exposed to a very toxic environment in the Gulf theater. Among other things, many of our men and women there came into contact with chemical warfare agents, depleted uranium, pesticides, petroleum products, and intense smoke from burning oil wells. In addition, many of them were given a number of preventative drugs such as pyridostigmine bromide which, in conjunction with the toxic environment, may have caused health problems.

In order to improve research into Gulf War Illness, I am proud that I was able to secure a grant for the National Institute of Environmental Health Science (NIEHS) - an agency **outside** of the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration. Further, working with the Research Division of the Veterans Administration, I hope to be able to announce soon that a trial program offering several treatment protocols will finally be available so we can begin to see what kind of treatments might improve the health of those suffering from Gulf War Illness.

Lastly, I am very proud to have received an award from the National Gulf War Resource Center, the veterans umbrella group on Gulf War Illness, for my efforts in Congress to help learn the truth about this terrible illness. I pledge to them, and to all veterans, that I will continue working hard on this issue until we find the cause of this disease, and develop an effective treatment.



## MEDICAL EXAMS NOW AVAILABLE TO GULF WAR VETERANS

Current and former National Guard members and Reservists who served in the Gulf War can now receive active-duty pay and travel allowances to take medical exams if they are ill due to service in the Gulf War. This program has been approved since October 1997, but it has only recently become public knowledge. Gulf War veterans may qualify for this program by contacting the Defense Department's Comprehensive Clinical Evaluation Program for Persian Gulf Veterans. The contact telephone number is (800) 796-9699.

1 Church Street, Second Floor  
Burlington, Vermont 05401-4417  
Telephone: 802-862-0697  
Toll-Free: 800-339-9834

Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Official Business



M.C.  
Bulk Rate

## IN THIS ISSUE...

- \* A Letter from Bernie
- \* Veterans and Health Care
- \* Gulf War Illness
- \* Useful Phone Numbers

*\* If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend. \**

*\* This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense. \**

## PHONE NUMBERS OF INTEREST TO VETERANS

State Veterans Affairs Office.....	Montpelier.....	828-3379
Vermont Veterans Home.....	Bennington.....	442-6353
	Toll-free.....	800-505-4000

### Veterans Administration

Regional Office (Benefits and Assistance).....	White River Junction.....	296-5177
	Toll-free.....	800-827-1000

Medical Center.....	White River Junction.....	295-9363
VA Outreach Clinic.....	White River Junction.....	296-6399
Appletree Bay VA Clinic.....	Burlington.....	864-4492
Bennington VA Clinic.....	Bennington.....	447-6913

Vet Centers.....	South Burlington.....	862-1806
	White River Junction.....	295-2908

### Department of Veterans Affairs

Acquisition Policy and Review Service (businesses).....	202-273-6047
---	--------------

Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization.....	202-565-8124
---	--------------

Assistant Secretary for Information Resources Management (Freedom of Information Act Requests).....	202-273-8135
--	--------------

To report waste or abuse in the DVA: Inspector General's Hotline.....	800-488-8244
---	--------------

Annual Report - write to the Analysis and Reports Service:  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW; Washington, D.C. 20420

Information on cemeteries and burial - write to the National Cemetery System:  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW; Washington, D.C. 20420